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ABSTRACT

Finland provides compulsory schooling for ten years, starting from age 7. The comprehensive school is divided into a 6-year lower stage and a 3-year upper stage, and schools are maintained by local municipalities, which also draw up the curricula. Schooling before age 7 is usually handled by social agencies, although a small number of 6-year-olds in sparsely populated rural areas receive government-sponsored preschool education. There were 378,000 children in the lower stage of comprehensive school and 3,863 schools in 1887/88. Most of these schools were small school units with combined classes. A system of "lesson hours" is used to apportion teaching group formation, and there are required amounts of remedial teaching. Children go to school 5 days per week (for a total of 190 days per year), for 5 hours in grades 1 and 2, and for 6 hours in grades 3-6. The government determines subjects taught, although emphasis varies from place to place. Most class teachers have Master's degrees, and schools also have access to psychological, medical and dental practitioners. Each school is governed by a 7-member board. Many municipalities are developing new curricula that emphasize innnovative methodology and integration of subject areas. (SKC)

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Project No. 8:
"Innovation in primary education"

Primary education in Finland

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COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL CO-OPERATION

Project No. 8 - Innovation in primary education

PRIMARY EDUCATION IN FINLAND

Report submitted by
the Finnish authorities

18.316
04.2

Primary education in grades I-VI for age groups 7-12

Introduction

1. In Finland the compulsory school age begins at seven and lasts ten years, unless the student has completed the comprehensive school before that.

2. In Finland the compulsory school consists of a nine-year comprehensive school, which is divided into a six-year lower stage and a three-year upper stage.

3. The current comprehensive school legislation dates from 1983.

Tasks and objectives of the comprehensive school

4. The tasks and objectives of the comprehensive school are laid down in legislation, which stipulates:

(a) The tasks

- The comprehensive school is nationally unified and provides citizens with a basic education.

(b) The objectives

- The comprehensive school aims at educating its pupils into balanced, fit, responsible, independent, creative, cooperative and peace-loving human beings and citizens.
- It should also teach its pupils to be decent and well-mannered and otherwise prepare them for life.

(c) The instruction

- The instruction and education given by the comprehensive school should provide the students with the knowledge and skills they need in order to be able to develop personally, to function in social and working life, to make career choices and pursue further studies, to protect the living environment and nature, and to promote national culture and

values as well as international cooperation and peace. The education should also promote equality between the sexes.
- The instruction must be in keeping with the students' age and abilities.
- The comprehensive school must strive to support the family in the rearing of the children.

5. These statutory aims are specified in more concrete terms in the comprehensive school curriculum and in the various subject syllabi. The objectives laid down in the relevant legislation apply to the comprehensive school as a whole and are not defined separately for the lower and upper stages.

6. The comprehensive schools are maintained by municipalities, which also draw up local curricula. The National Board of General Education, which is directly subordinate to the Ministry of Education, issues directives concerning the curricula and confirms the subject syllabi. These documents leave the municipalities scope for decision on the organization and content of teaching.

7. As already mentioned, compulsory schooling begins when a child turns seven. Before that, education is generally arranged by the social authorities. Comprehensive schools may, however, be authorized by the Ministry of Education to arrange pre-school education. This form covers a relatively small number of six-year-old children at present. In most cases such education is arranged in connection with the two first classes of comprehensive schools situated in sparsely populated rural areas, where the social authorities would have problems with practical implementation of pre-school instruction. The general principle adopted in Finland is that pre-school education provided by the school authorities complements in sparsely populated areas the pre-school activities organized by the social authorities.

8. Cooperation between the day-care system (including the pre-school classes) and the comprehensive school takes the form

of school visits arranged in the spring for six-seven year old children who will begin school in the autumn. Instructions concerning curriculum have been issued for both forms of pre-school education. These instructions underline the importance of developing general skills the children need in school.

9. During the school year 1987/88 there were a total of 378,000 children on the lower stage of the comprehensive school.

10. In the school year 1987/88 there were a total of 3863 lower-stage schools in Finland. The majority of them were small school units with combined classes. Some 68% of the schools had 1-3 teachers, but owing to the small size of the classes, the pupils in these schools represent less than 20% of the total number of lower-stage pupils in Finland. It is a good indication of the tendency to support small schools that the minimum number of students needed to keep a one-teacher school is six.

11. The formation of teaching groups is governed by a lesson hour quota system defined in the Comprehensive School Act. Each lower-stage school has a certain number (quota) of lesson hours per teacher post, part of which must be used for remedial teaching. In addition to this, each municipality has a certain computational quota that can be divided between schools in the area. In the school year 1978/88 the average quota was 29.7 lesson hours per class teacher post. Each school decides on the size of its teaching groups within the framework of its lesson hour quota. When the whole class is taught by its class teacher alone it uses up one lesson hour, if the class is divided into two groups taught by different teachers it uses up two lesson hours, etc. The average size of a lower-stage teaching group (class) was 20 pupils in 1987/88.

12. The pupils' school day may not exceed 5 hours in the 1-2 grades and 6 hours in the 3-6 grades. A teaching hour is 60

minutes, but only 45 minutes of it are used for actual teaching. The minimum lunch break is 30 minutes.

The pupils go to school five days a week, from Monday to Friday. In grades 1-2 the weekly number of study hours is 19-21, in grades 3-4 23-25 hours and in grades 5-6 24-26 hours.

The school year is 190 school days, beginning in August (usually mid-August) and ends on the 6th of June at the latest.

13. The subjects to be taught on the lower stage of the comprehensive school are defined in legislation. The Council of State decides on the distribution of lesson hours between the subjects. Within this framework each municipality makes its own work schedules. A great number of municipalities have left it to the schools to decide on their own schedules in the scope defined by the Council of State. This means that different schools in one municipality, or even different classes in the same school, may have different distribution of lesson hours. The different emphasis placed on subjects reflects the pupils' interests and their parents' views.

14. The subjects and the weekly lesson hours are shown in the following table, which is based on a decision taken by the Council of State in 1985.

Subject	Grades 1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Mother tongue	7	7	5-6	5-6	4-6	4-6	32-28
Foreign language or second national language	—	—	2	2	2	2	8
Environmental studies, biology and geography	2	2	2-3	2-3	3-4	3-4	14-18
Civics and citizenship	—	—	0-1	0-1	0-1	0-1	2-3
Religion or ethics and life skills	2	2	2	2	1	1	10
History	—	—	—	—	1-3	1-3	3-6
Mathematics	3	3	4	4	4	3	21
Music	1-2	1-2	1-4	1-4	1-4	1-4	6-18
Art	1-2	1-2	1-4	1-4	1-4	1-4	6-18
Handicraft	1-2	1-2	2-4	2-4	2-4	2-4	10-18
Physical education	1-2	1-2	2-3	2-3	2-3	2-3	15-16
Maximum number of hours per pupil	19-21	19-21	23-25	23-25	24-26	24-26	134-144

Mother tongue is either Finnish or Swedish. The foreign language is English, German, French or Russian. Religion is usually either Evangelical-Lutheran or Orthodox, or possibly some other religion; pupils who have no religion are taught ethics. Civics and citizenship includes student guidance. In the area where the Saami population lives, mother tongue may be Saami or Finnish, and instruction may be given in Saami in other subjects as well.

15. The pupil's behaviour and diligence, as well as his/her skills in each subject are assessed at the end of the autumn and spring terms on a scale 4-10. The attainment of pupils in the first to third grades may be assessed in a descriptive written report. The emphasis is on a continued formative assessments of the pupil's progress.

16. On the lower stage pupils are generally taught by a class teacher in all the subjects. Only foreign languages are usually taught by subject teachers. Class teachers have a Master's degree in education (a five-year university training). According to an agreement made in teachers' collective bargaining, teachers have three days of in-service training each year.

17. In Finland school psychologist services are not statutory, but schools in larger towns and cities provide these services. Finland has an network of educational counselling maintained by the municipalities, which also comprises a psychologist's and social worker's services. These services are intended for pre-school children, too.

In cooperation with health care stations, the local school authorities arrange medical and dental services. Each school district has a school nurse. In sparsely populated areas medical services are arranged with the help of mobile clinics.

School meals are provided by the municipalities.

18. Each school is governed by a 7-member board of directors appointed by the municipal council. At least three of the members are pupils' parents, one represents the school's teachers and one the rest of the staff. Two or more schools may also have a joint board of directors. The board of directors has a considerable influence on school work, since it takes decisions on the work plan (which includes the use of the lesson hour quota and, in some cases, the distribution of lessons), on the textbooks, on school rules etc. Apart from various administrative tasks, the board of directors has a duty to further the education given by the school by developing cooperation between the school and home.

The responsibility for local school administration belongs to the municipal school board.

The situation in school development and future prospects

19. The present school legislation, which was passed in 1983, has introduced a considerable increase in the scope the municipality and the school have for deciding educational content and teaching arrangements. The municipalities adopted new curricula in 1986 and 1987. One of the central goals of the legislation is to support the municipalities in continuous development of curricula. The municipalities are encouraged to include more material on local culture, industry and economy, and nature and to keep the curricula up-to-date. As regards work in each school, the goal is to encourage a distinctive approach and an innovative methodology. It is considered important for the municipalities and schools to carry out continuous development and not be content with mere administrative changes required by the new legislation. The National Board of General Education has launched projects intended to support further curricular development.

20. One particular development object on the lower stage is integration of subjects. In this, the aim is to make use of the pupils' activity in the learning process and to give a comprehensive picture of different phenomena to the pupils. Although the existing regulations and statutes give a relatively large scope for such integration, some experiments have been launched to explore the need and possibilities for developing legislation in this respect.